

Quinque 3: The Truth is Out There

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Untitled Disclaimer: Everyone who has been on the show The Real Adventures of Jonny Quest belongs to HB and everyone you don't recognize belongs to me.

Prologue

The year is 2015. The world as we know it no longer exists.

In 2003, Ezekial Rage launched nuclear bombs from China at Cairo, London, Moscow, and Tokyo. The targeted cities retaliated before asking questions. By 2005, the world economy had collapsed, and the United States government fell apart. The former superpower has split into two warring halves, Dulab and Zinja.

The new America is one of hardships and struggles. Warfare has decimated most of the population between the ages of 35 and 65 and has drained the continent of its natural resources. The young and hardy have quickly risen through the ranks to become the new leaders. They are strong, smart, and willing to do anything they have to if it means the end of the war.

Dulab, consisting of the former states of Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, South Dakota, and Montana, is dedicated to upholding life as they knew it before the war. They are led by Commander Bennett and Roger "Race" Bannon, men well acquainted with military expeditions. Zinja, made of the states of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, Colorado, and Kansas, has fallen under the rule of a madman named Dr. Zin. Zin's ultimate goal is global domination, starting with the fall of Dulab.

The Dulabian's fight back courageously. They have organized Task

Forces composed of their best young freedom fighters. As Quinque, the most elite Task Force, Jonathan Quest, Jessica Bannon, Alexander Anderson, Ashley Ray, and Dion Jennings fight to defend and expand the Dulab territory against Zin. Quinque is passionately determined to resurrect the world they once knew.

Quinque #3: The Truth is Out There

"Who is Apollo?"

The man standing in front of Dr. Zin swallowed nervously. "We don't know."

Dr. Zin sighed and ran a hand across his smooth head. "Aaron, you are supposed to be the best spy money can buy."

"I am," Aaron replied. "But even their files don't mention his real name. It's like he never existed as anyone before becoming Apollo."

"Except to Race Bannon and Quinque." Zin clasped his hands behind his back. "Aaron, you have disappointed me."

"Let me go back, Zin. I'll stay until I find out his real name."

"No." Zin waved a hand, cutting him off. "It's time for a different approach."

"What would you like me to do, Dr. Zin?"

"I would like to talk to Apollo. Personally."

"What?" Aaron's jaw dropped. "But Dr. Zin . . . "

"Bring me Apollo."

* * *

"All right, girls." Aaron looked at the three men surrounding him. "We have our orders." He had hand picked each of the men and he trusted them and their skills. "Zin wants Apollo."

"What?" Next to Aaron, Ryan's brown eyes grew wide. "He wants who?"

"Apollo," Aaron repeated. "Zin wants Apollo. And we'll probably have to go through Quinque to get to him." He slapped a photo down on the table in front of them. "This is Jessica Bannon, age twenty-four. Her father is Race Bannon. She has red hair, green eyes, and is smart as well as having the skills to beat any of your butts in a physical fight. If possible, stay away from her."

Aaron put another picture down next to Jessie's. "This is Ashley Ray, age twenty-one. She's been with Quinque for five months now. She has brown hair, brown eyes, and was recruited because she's real good with electronics."

"Alexander Anderson, age twenty-three. He has brown hair, blue eyes, and is quite the smooth talker. I've heard he once talked Bannon out

of his own shirt."

His men grinned.

"This is Dion Jennings, age twenty-five. Black hair, brown eyes, and a mute. He's the other one you're going to have to stay out of the way of." Aaron spread his hands out. "And Apollo. No one has any pictures of him and no one will admit to having met him. He's Quinque's leader, so once we take him, they're going to be after him. Any questions?"

"Yeah." Kyle, the strongest man in the group, said. "Where are we taking him?"

"We'll be delivering him to Zinja headquarters in Austin, Texas."

* * *

Jonny Quest slowly opened his eyes with a small grin. It felt so good to be able to sleep in until . . . he looked at his watch, which laid on the night stand by the bed . . . 9:34 in the morning. And for once he did not have to fear for his life from dawn to dusk. Technically Quinque was on vacation for a week -- and a well-deserved one as Race kept saying.

Next to him, Jessie Bannon rolled over and placed a protective arm around his waist.

"You're not thinking of getting up yet, are you?" she murmured.

"Actually, I was." Turning back over, he gave her a quick kiss on the forehead. "You know that your father wanted to see me sometime this morning."

"We're on vacation," she replied.

"I'm not sure if Race even really knows the definition of a vacation." He gave her one of his patented lopsided grins. "I'm sure it won't take long. Besides, we were going to go into the city for lunch with him anyway. We'll just leave a little earlier than we originally planned. Don't worry, I'm sure he doesn't have another mission lined up for us. Yet."

Jessie laughed and kissed him. He finally managed to disentangle himself from her and clambered out of bed, pulling on a pair of blue jeans. Padding over to the closet, he put on a black shirt. From her position on the bed, Jessie grinned at him.

"With all the changes in the last ten years, your wardrobe is the one thing that has stayed exactly the same."

Jonny grinned. "You can't mess with perfection."

Laughing, he ducked as Jessie threw a pillow at him.

An hour later they were driving toward downtown Columbus where Intelligence Command headquarters was located.

"What do you think he wants?" Jessie asked as the wind whipped her

red hair around.

Jonny shrugged. "I don't know. I'm pretty sure it's nothing official or he would have called the whole team together."

"And Hadj hasn't said anything so he doesn't know about it either."

"So it can't be anything official then."

"I suppose not."

Ten minutes later they pulled into a parking space outside the headquarters building. Two guards, Orchard and Sampson their nameplates proclaimed, stood outside, checking everyone's passes as they entered the building.

"Good morning, Miss Bannon," Orchard, the one on the right, said.

"Good morning," Jessie replied.

"Apollo." Sampson nodded at Jonny.

"Good morning." Jonny smiled at the guard.

Orchard opened the door for both of them.

"You know, if you start being nice to the natives, you're going to lose that aura of mystique you always have about you," Jessie joked.

"Not as long as they don't know my real name, I won't."

They took the elevator to the top floor. There were only two officers on the top floor -- Race and Bennett's, the two leaders of Dulab. Jonny knocked on the door to Race's office.

"Who is it?" Race's voice sounded from the other side.

"It's me."

Race's voice took a light tone. "Come on in."

With a raised eyebrow, Jonny glanced at Jessie, who shrugged in ignorance of her father's mood. He opened the door and they both stepped into Race's office. Race was leaning against his desk and turned to smile at them. In one of the chairs near the desk sat a middle-aged man with graying hair. Jonny felt his face break into a grin as he recognized the man.

"Commandant Taber," he exclaimed.

Surprised, the commandant turned to look at him. "Zachary Morris? But you're . . . "

". . . dead?" Jonny grinned. "Hardly. I think that if I did die, Race would bring me back to life just so he could kill me again."

Jonny had met Commandant Taber a month ago when he was working undercover in Zinja. Taber, at that time, had been in charge of one of the Zinja Guard camps.

"Taber, I'd like you to meet my daughter, Jessie. And the young man you know as Zachary Morris has the more popular name of Apollo."

Taber's eyes grew wide. "You're Apollo?"

"At your service."

Taber groaned. "So that whole time and everything I told you . . . the mission . . ."

". . . was compromised from the beginning, yes." Jonny nodded. "I'm sorry . . ."

Taber waved at the young man. "You were just doing your job, I can understand that." He laughed. "I still can't believe it though. We all thought you were dead."

Jonny smiled. "That was the point. People don't normally start looking for dead people."

"Which means you could infiltrate another camp without much worry." Taber shook his head at his former enemies' audacity.

"Exactly." Race turned toward Jonny. "Commandant Taber started having second thoughts about Zinja after the failure of your mission. He would like a chance in Dulab. What do you think, Apollo?"

Jonny clapped Taber on the back. "I think he would be a great addition."

Race smiled. "I think so, too." He paused. "Are we still on for lunch?"

Jonny and Jessie nodded.

"There's a few things I need to talk over with Hadji before our 'vacation' is over," Jonny said. "Do you want to come along, Jess?"

Jessie shook her head. "No, I'll go down into the lab and see how some of the latest projects are going. Want to meet back here at noon?"

"Sounds good to me. Race?"

"That will be fine. Thanks for stopping by."

"No, Race, thank you." Jonny shook hands with Taber. "And it was good to see you again, Commandant."

"You as well, Apollo."

Still smiling, Jonny and Jessie left Race's office.

"That was quite a surprise," Jonny said as they made their way to the

elevator.

"But a good surprise, right?"

Jonny grinned. "Very good." He sighed in contentment as the elevator doors opened. "You know, I think this vacation thing is a good idea. I don't know if I've been this relaxed since before the fall."

Jessie smiled. "I know what you mean. I can't remember the last time I actually saw Dad smile. He seems so happy."

"And how about you, Jess? Are you happy?"

She glanced up at him, meeting his blue eyes. "As happy as I can be."

The elevator stopped.

"This is my floor." Jonny kissed her lightly on the forehead. "I'll see you at noon."

As the doors closed behind him, he sighed and rubbed his head with a hand. As much as they would like, there could never be anything permanent between . . .

"Apollo?" Someone from the end of the hallway called out to him.

"Yes?" Jonny turned to see an obviously out of breath man frantically waving at him. Curiosity showed on his face as Jonny made his way toward the man. "Can I help you?"

"Bennett . . . looking . . . sorry . . . hold on . . ." The man turned away from Jonny as he tried to catch his breath. "I'm sorry, Apollo. Bennett has men looking everywhere for you."

Jonny frowned. "Why? What's happening?"

The man shrugged. "All I know is that Bennett wants to see you."

Jonny's frowned deepened. Something just did not feel right about this situation. "I just came from the top floor. How come someone didn't say anything about it then?"

Again the man shrugged. "I don't claim to know what Bennett's thinking. Please, just come with me."

Jonny allowed himself to be led over to the elevators, determined to figure out what was going on. His eyes narrowed when the man pushed the down button.

"Bennett's office is on the top floor . . ." Jonny started, trying to pull out of the man's grip.

The elevator doors opened and the man pushed him inside. "Bennett's not in his office."

Jonny whirled, settling into a fighting stance. "Who are you?"

"The name's Kyle." He reached into the pocket of his jacket and palmed a very small aerosol canister.

"And is that name supposed to mean anything to me?" Apollo growled.

"Probably not," Kyle admitted.

Before Apollo could react, Kyle threw him against the side of the elevator. Stunned, Apollo grabbed onto the handrail to keep from falling to the floor. Immediately, Kyle moved toward him, releasing the contents of the canister in front of Apollo.

Apollo heard a slight hissing sound and took a deep breath, shaking his head in an attempt to clear the sudden fog away. His body felt heavy and he slumped to the floor. He felt more than saw Kyle kneel down beside him.

"You might not know me, but I definitely think you'll recognize my employer's name."

Kyle pressed a sweet smelling cloth over Apollo's mouth and nose. As darkness came to claim him, Apollo heard Kyle say one last word.

"Zin."

* * *

Jessie gazed at her watch and sighed. 12:10.

"He's late," she stated, looking at her father.

Race raised an eyebrow. "And that's new because . . .?"

"No." Jessie sighed again. "In fact, it's just like him."

"Don't worry, Jess. He'll be here. He probably just got carried away talking with Hadji and they both lost track of time."

"Yeah, you're right." Jessie sat down in a chair, rubbing her forehead with a hand. "Of course you're right."

Race sharply glanced at her. "You're really worried, aren't you?"

She reluctantly nodded. "This just isn't like him."

Her father stared at her for a moment and then nodded. "I'll give Hadji a call." He picked up the phone and dialed their friend's number. "Hadji? It's Race . . . I'm fine. Look, could you tell Apollo that Jess and I are waiting for him." Race paused. "What? But he said he was going to go talk to you."

Jessie's head snapped up and her eyes grew wide with worry.

"No, it's all right. I'm sure everything's just fine." He paused.

"Yes, I'll be sure to give you a call when we find him. Thanks, Hadji." Sighing, Race hung up the phone. "He says Jonny never stopped

by his office."

"But Jonny got off at his floor . . . " She trailed off. "I'll give him a call. He's going to have a bit of explaining to do this time around." Reaching into her jacket, she pulled out her cell phone and dialed the number to Jonny's phone. Her frown deepened with each unanswered ring. "He's not picking up."

"He didn't just disappear," Race said. "This is Intelligence Command headquarters, for goodness sake. He has to be around somewhere. Can you pick him up on your watch?"

Jessie turned on the tracker in her watch and shook her head. "He's not coming in. Do you still have the tracking software on your computer? I should be able to pick him up then regardless of where he is."

Race nodded. "Be my guest. But at this point I don't know if he wants me to find him. I'm more likely to kill him then hug him."

"That makes two of us." Jessie watched as a green Q showed up on the computer screen. "What the . . . ?" She looked up at her father. "He's almost to Cincinnati."

"Cincinnati? What is he doing on his way to Cincinnati?"

"And that, Dad, is the question of the hour."

* * *

Jonny woke to someone slapping his face. From the burning sensation on his cheek, that was not the first time the person had hit him either. He opened his eyes just in time to see the hand descend again. His head rocked from the force of the blow. As far as Jonny could tell, he was sitting in the back of a moving van, his arms tied behind him.

"Sleeping beauty is finally awake, girls." The hand grabbed Jonny's hair, forcing him to look at the face of his captor.

"Who are you?" Jonny's throat was dry.

"The name is Aaron. I work for Dr. Zin and he has requested a personal audience with you, Apollo."

"But I'm not Ap . . . "

Aaron's free hand grabbed Jonny's neck, choking him. "Don't give me that. You are Apollo. And every time you say you aren't, you will only get hurt more. Do you understand me?"

Jonny nodded and gasped for breath when Aaron released his hold.

"Now," Aaron continued. "We can do this the hard way or the easy way. The hard way involves lots of enjoyment for the three of us, but lots of pain for you. On the other hand, the easy way makes for a boring trip for us, but you get to keep your body in one piece. Choose wisely, Apollo. I don't think I have to tell you which way me and my men would like it to go."

To Jonny's right, Kyle cracked his knuckles.

Jonny shook his head. "I'll behave," he grimly said. For a little while.

As the men moved away, Jonny tested his bonds, but found them tightly tied. Even Hadji's teachings would not help him out of his one. Just then he saw a reflection of green light on the side of the van's wall. That meant he still had his watch -- and that someone has trying to get a hold of him. He could not let the men know that Quinque was tracking him. But he could still use his watch to help him get out of this situation. Shifting slightly, Jonny managed to touch the third button on the right side of the watch's face. Immediately a laser cut through the ropes. With a small grin, Jonny made a mental note to thank Jessie and Ashley for the newly added feature.

"What are you grinning at?" Kyle asked suspiciously, nearing Jonny.

"Oh, nothing," Jonny replied. "I was just wondering why Zin would want me of all people. I mean, I would think Jessie Bannon might be a better bargaining piece."

"Zin doesn't want to bargain," Aaron said. "He just wants to know all your secrets."

"I don't have any secrets." Jonny tried to look innocent.

"Right." The man who Jonny did not know laughed. "If you don't have any secrets, what's your real name, boy?"

"Would you believe me if I said my parents played a bad joke on me by naming me Apollo?"

"No," the man harshly answered, balling his fists.

"Ryan . . . " Aaron warned. "There's no need for that. Just shut him up."

Ryan nodded and grabbed a piece of cloth from a pile in one of the corner's.

"Sorry, but I'm not going to let you put that thing in my mouth," Jonny said as Ryan approached him. "I have no idea where it's been."

Lashing out with his foot, Jonny caught Ryan between the legs. And even before Ryan fell to the floor of the van, groaning, Jonny was up and running toward the doors. Aaron grabbed at him, but he dodged away and ran right into Kyle. The strong man pulled him into a bear hug, pushing Jonny's breath out of his body.

Immediately Race's training took over. Jonny pushed his arms up, causing Kyle to loosen his arms long enough for Jonny to duck underneath them. Only to be caught in the side by Aaron's fist.

Jonny heavily fell against the side of the van, making it rock

slightly. He managed to recover enough to get out of the way of Kyle's punch. In return, Jonny kicked Kyle in the stomach, causing the man to stagger backwards.

Out of the corner of his eye, Jonny saw Aaron launch himself towards him. Jonny took a few steps to the left, but Aaron still managed to grab Jonny's ankle, making Jonny stumble to one knee. Suddenly Kyle was there, wrenching his right arm behind his back. He gasped as pain suddenly shot up through his shoulder.

"If you make another move, I'll rip it off," Kyle threatened.

"Ryan, hurry up," Aaron yelled.

Jonny thrust his free elbow backwards, right into Kyle's gut. Kyle let out a rush of air, but did not let go of Jonny's arm. Aaron grabbed his other arm, jerking it behind his back. Then Ryan was in front of Jonny, holding a rag to his face. Jonny held his breath and turned his head to the side. Aaron twisted his arm and Jonny caught his breath in agony. But one breath was enough and he slid into blackness.

* * *

Twenty minutes later, the remaining members of Quinque and Hadji were gathered in Race's office.

"What's going on?" Ashley was the last to arrive. "Where's Apollo?" She looked at Jessie's grim face.

"In Cincinnati," Jessie replied, watching her father's computer screen.

"What?" Xander yelped. "What's he doing in Cincinnati?"

Jessie sighed and ran a hand through her red hair. "We think he's been kidnapped."

The door suddenly opened and Taber stuck his head into the office.

"Oh, sorry Bannon, I didn't know . . ." he started.

Race waved at him to come in. "No, it's quite all right, Taber. Please, come on in. You might be able to help us with a little problem we have." He quickly introduced Quinque and their coordinator to the former commandant.

"Where's Apollo?" Taber's eyes narrowed.

"Popular question," Jessie replied. She told him about Apollo's disappearance.

"Cincinnati?" Taber frowned.

Suddenly Jessie cursed and everyone in the room turned to look at her.

"That clinches it. Apollo is not on his way to Cincinnati of his own

free will." She looked at her father. "His watch was just removed."

Race nodded. "And he would never take it off unless it meant his life."

"His watch? How can you know if he's taken off his watch?" Confusion crossed Taber's face.

Ashley showed Taber her own watch. "Every member of Quinque has one of these watches. One of the features is that the back is heat sensitive. Therefore . . ."

"Therefore if the watch isn't registering some sort of heat, then it's no longer on Apollo's wrist." Taber's eyes grew wide. "You Dulabian's certainly are advanced. I've never even thought of such a thing."

"You can be impressed at a later date," Hadji interrupted. "What are we going to do, Race? We must figure out where whoever has Apollo is taking him."

"Right now we need to get on his tail. We can worry about his destination later." He reached into his desk drawer and pulled out two sets of keys. "Jess, Dion, you're driving. Follow him."

Quinque nodded and started heading toward the door.

"Hadji, you're going with them."

They all stopped, staring back at Race.

"But Race, I'm . . . " Hadji started.

"If I only wanted four members on this team, it would be named Quattuor. This is a potentially dangerous situation. I want five of you. There's no arguing with me on this one, Sultan. You're going with them." He looked at Jessie and then Dion. "I want those jeeps off headquarters property in ten minutes. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, sir." Jessie replied and then the five were gone.

Race rubbed his head and sat down in the chair behind his desk with a sigh. "Any thoughts, Taber?"

"Just one," Taber admitted. "Who else would be bold enough to send men into Intelligence Command headquarters with orders to take the best and most secret spy in Dulab?"

Race nodded. "I was afraid you were going to say that. Bennett is not going to be happy."

* * *

"Wake up, pretty boy." Aaron's voice penetrated Jonny's dreams.

A foot kicking his side brought Jonny fully awake. He felt cold metal around his wrists and realized that they had handcuffed him, instead of taking a second chance with rope.

Kyle hauled him to his feet, and he groaned into his gag at the soreness that had settled into his body while he had been unconscious.

And I'm supposed to be on vacation.

"By the way, that's a nice watch you had," Aaron commented. "Had, of course, being the operative word in that sentence. Don't worry, boy, I learn from my mistakes. You won't get a chance like that again, not while I'm around."

Jonny closed his eyes, hoping that they had not destroyed the watch. While it remained, he could still harbor hope that Quinque was tracking him. Someone slapped his face, and he opened his eyes to glare at Aaron.

"Don't fall asleep on me, boy. It's time to take a little plane ride."

Aaron grabbed a long piece of leather that had been lying on the floor next to his feet. There was a clip on one end, making it look like a leash. Reaching over toward Jonny, Aaron fastened it to something below Jonny's neck. As Aaron pulled on the other end, Jonny realized he was wearing some sort of collar. He had no choice but to follow Aaron, like a dog, as Aaron got out of the van. _ _

All right, Jonny thought darkly. This is beyond humiliating.

A fourth man, the driver of the van, joined them. After a hard tug that made Jonny stumble, they started toward the waiting plane.

"You can fly this thing, right, Sean?" Aaron asked the fourth man.

"Without a problem, boss."

"Good."

With a jerk, Aaron pulled Jonny into the small plane that would just fit the four of them, plus the pilot, comfortably. Aaron motioned that Jonny should take a seat, and seeing no other choice, Jonny did as ordered. Ryan reached over to buckle Jonny into the seat as Aaron tied the leash to one of the metal arms of the tray table in front of Jonny's seat. Jonny leaned his head back and closed his eyes. _

—

This is going to be a very long flight.

* * *

"Jess, I think we have a problem," Hadji said as he looked at the laptop screen in front of him.

"What now?"

Hadji and her were in one of the jeeps Race had given them while Dion, Xander, and Ashley occupied the other one. They had two laptops, one in each car, in case they got separated for some reason.

"His direction has changed and he's moving a lot faster now."

Jessie narrowed her eyes. "What are you trying to tell me, Hadj?"

"It looks like he's on a plane. And they're headed south."

"Into Zinja?"

"That would be a reasonable destination."

Just then Jessie's cell phone rang. "Caroline."

"Are you two picking up Apollo?" Ashley's voice sounded worried.

Jessie glanced into the rear view mirror to look at the other jeep. Dion's face was set while Xander was turned around in his seat so that he could see Ashley as she talked to Jess. "Yeah, we see it. Sultan says he got on a plane."

"We'll never catch up with him then."

"I need to call my father and tell him what's happened. We'll keep heading towards Cincinnati until I hear otherwise."

"All right. Sandman out." Ashley hung up the phone.

"Well?" Xander asked, the wind messing up his hair. "What did she say?"

"We're to keep on unless notified differently."

Dion nodded to let her know he had heard her.

"She's also going to call Race and get his input into the situation."

Xander nodded. "That makes sense. He should be aware of what's happening anyway."

"Sort of speaking of Race, did you two see the look in Jessie's eyes while we were in Race's office? It seemed like she was actually worried about Jonny. Do you think she likes him?"

Xander and Dion exchanged glances. Dion shrugged and motioned to Xander.

"Ash, you haven't been in a Task Force for very long. Things are different when it comes to relationships -- any kind of relationship."

"What do you mean?" She leaned forward.

Xander rubbed his forehead. "You'll learn about this some more the longer you're on a Task Force, but essentially, it's best not to hold feelings for anyone on a Task Force." He sighed as Ashley frowned.

"I'm not explaining this very well."

"Understatement," Ashley agreed.

"That's because it's a fairly hard concept to get across. All right, let's attack it from a different angle. Hypothetically speaking, let's say that Jonny and Jessie like each other."

"Okay, I can see that."

"Now, Quinque is sent out on a mission to stop a bomb, per say. Only once we reach the bomb, it's being kept in a warehouse full of twenty armed Zinja soldiers. Now, Jonny comes up with the plan that one of us should go through the front door as a distraction while the other four burst in from the back."

Ashley nodded. "I'm following you so far."

"Jessie is the first logical choice for Jonny to send in as the distraction. Do you agree?"

"Uh huh."

"But Jonny looks at Jessie and realizes he has feelings for her, possibly even loves her. And therefore, he decides he can't send Jessie in first. It's a very dangerous position and she might get hurt or killed. Therefore he decides to send in Dion, the next logical choice. Dion goes in as planned, but because he doesn't have the experience Jessie has, is killed the moment he gets through the doorway. If Jessie had gone, though, she would have known to somersault out of the way. Very possibly, she would have lived, Dion would have lived, the bad guys taken down, and Dulab saved. But because Jonny let his feelings get in the way, Jessie didn't go, Dion was killed, and Jonny, in deep remorse, kills himself a month later. Following his lead, Jessie then kills herself, Race becomes depressed, and Dr. Zin takes total control of Dulab five months later."

"Now, that is, I will admit, a worse case scenario."

"I get the idea," Ashley replied. "So emotions are bad between Task Force members. All right, what if Jessie left Quinque and settled down in Columbus?"

"And gave up watching Jonny's back? I don't think so."

Ashley sighed. "So you're telling me that the only way those two could get together is if both of them gave up being in Quinque."

Xander nodded.

"Except that the only reason Jonny would get out of Quinque is if he was dead . . . " She trailed off.

Xander nodded again. "Exactly."

* * *

"Apollo has been what?" Bennett's voice grew louder with each word.

"Kidnapped," Race calmly replied.

"How?"

Race sighed. "The back way."

"That secret passageway from Harrison's office? I thought we had men watching that entrance."

"We do. They were knocked unconscious. I've already talked to the two guards on duty at the time and they don't remember hearing or seeing a thing. Until they woke up, that is."

"What are we doing to find him?"

"I've sent Quinque after him." Just then Race's cell phone rang. "Excuse me a moment, Bennett." He made his way to a corner of the office. "Bannon."

"It's Caroline."

"Did you find him?"

"No, and it's worse now. As near as we can tell, he's on a plane headed right into Zinja."

Race cursed. "Why Apollo?"

He could hear the helplessness in her voice. "I don't know, Dad. But think about it. Who's the one person who has managed to foil Zin's plans time and time again? Who's the one person Zin wouldn't have any intelligence on?"

"That last one is probably the kicker. Zin doesn't know anything about Apollo."

"That's our guess."

Race closed his eyes. "All right. If Apollo's on a plane, I want Quinque on a plane. We have a base in Cincinnati -- use it."

"But we don't know where they're taking him."

"Yes, we do. They're taking him to Zin in Austin."

"I'll keep in touch. Caroline out."

"What's going on, Bannon?" Bennett asked.

Quickly, Race summed up everything Jessie had told him. "So they're still after him."

Frowning, Bennett crossed his arms. "Maybe keeping his identity hidden wasn't the best idea after all."

"Bennett, this is the first time after the fall that Zin's been after him. I think I could get used to those odds. And besides, we might not have to worry about it for too much longer, not if Zin does see

him."

"Do you think Zin will recognize Apollo?"

"I don't know, Bennett, I just don't know."

* * *

"Hadj, will you call the other jeep and tell them what Dad said?"

"Sure, Jess." He swiftly dialed Ashley's number while still keeping an eye on the laptop screen.

"Sandman."

"It's Sultan. Bannon says to keep driving to Cincinnati. We'll get a plane there and follow them in the air."

"All right, I'll tell Pudge and Stick. Sandman out."

There was a small smile on Hadji's face as he hung up the phone.

"What are you smiling at?" Jess wondered.

"I was just thinking about something."

"What?"

"Why is Xander's call sign Stick?"

Jessie laughed. "He's been with Quinque for almost a year and a half and you're just now getting around to asking that?"

Hadji ducked his head. "Yes."

"Ever hear the phrase 'Walk softly and carry a big stick'? It pretty much describes our Xander perfectly."

Hadji smiled. "Yes, I suppose it does."

* * *

A little over an hour later, Quinque was in the air with Jessie at the controls and Hadji as her co-pilot.

"You know, it's been a long time since we've worked together like this," Jessie said as they lifted above the clouds.

"Our lives went in separate directions," Hadji flatly stated.

"Why? That's the one thing Jonny and I could never figure out. Why did you leave Quinque?"

Hadji sighed, his brown eyes filling with sorrow. "I couldn't handle it anymore, Jess."

"Couldn't handle what?" She glanced at her friend.

"Everything in some ways. I couldn't handle watching Jonny throw himself into every dangerous situation that we ran across. I couldn't handle watching you throw yourself into that same situation to save him. I couldn't handle the lying, the sneaking, and the cheating. And I couldn't handle Race's face every time we left on another mission. He seemed to lose a part of his humanity each time we were sent away. Everyday he knew there was a strong possibility that one, if not all of us, might not make it back. Besides, I'm happy where I am, Jess. I make a good coordinator for Quinque."

"Yes, you do," Jess softly agreed. "Dr. Quest would be very proud of you."

"Do you know how often I feel like I have disappointed him? I sense it every time I send Jonny into Zinja."

"It's Jonny's choice," Jessie argued. "You know that you can never stop him once he gets an idea into his head. Sometimes all you can do is encourage him to be careful and send people to watch over him."

"Dr. Quest would hate what his son has become."

Jessie looked at him from the corner of her eye. "Which son?"

A ghost of a grin crossed Hadji's face. "Both, I suppose. You know he always wanted Jonny and I to have a normal childhood."

"If you had, you wouldn't be the person you are now, Hadj."

"And exactly who am I?" Hadji asked quietly.

Jessie reached across the cabin to lay a hand gently on his shoulder. She had known the war was tough on him, but had not realized everything that was tearing him up from the inside.

"You are my friend," she said simply.

Hadji smiled at her. "As you are mine."

Her mind turned back to Jonny. "Hadj, would you mind taking the controls for a few minutes? I'd like to go back and see how we're doing with tracking Jonny."

He nodded as Jessie slipped out of her seat. Before she left the cockpit, she placed a hand on Hadji's cheek. Hadji turned toward her, surprised.

"You are my friend," she repeated and then was gone.

As she left the cockpit, she saw Quinque gathered around one of the laptops. She could not help but grin at the sight.

"Roasting marshmallows?" She joked.

They all jumped at her voice.

"God, Jess, you scared us," Ash said, her hand near her throat.

Jessie laughed. "I'm sorry, but you three were so intent on watching the screen. And speaking of which, how are we doing?"

"Well, as long as whoever has Jonny's watch is still with Jonny, we're still about an hour behind them," Xander answered.

"We're not catching up to him at all?" Jessie asked.

"No," Dion signed. "We don't seem to be at least."

"We need to figure out a good place to land once we get there. Pull up a map of the area and find some place that's not right at the city, but not too far either. We can't let them know we're coming," Jessie instructed.

"What about you, Jess?" Ashley wondered. "Any member of the Zinja Guard is going to recognize you the moment they see your hair."

Jessie grinned. "That's why hats exist."

* * *

Another van waited for them as they got off the plane. Aaron still led Apollo, not wanting to give him another opportunity to fight free. Sean again clambered into the driver's seat as the other three men settled down around Jonny in the back.

"Another few minutes, Apollo, and then you'll be in Zin's hands," Aaron said.

All Jonny could do was angrily glare at the man.

"And soon, all of Zinja will know who Apollo really is," Ryan sneered. "You won't be able to hide anywhere, not even if you manage to escape. Zin will keep hunting you until you're dead." _ _

Which is exactly the reason why I go by Apollo in the first place, Jonny thought. For a long moment, he let himself indulge in a daydream of Quinque rescuing him before they reached Zinja headquarters.

The van shuddered to a halt and Kyle opened the doors. "We're here."

Aaron picked up the strip of leather and pulled Apollo outside. They were standing in front of the capitol building, though its walls had long ago turned from white to a dirty gray. Jonny remembered seeing the building before the fall. It was hard to reconcile the memory to the reality.

Ten Zinja Guards neared them, eyeing Aaron and his men warily.

"Is this him?" The leader of the guards asked, hardly glancing at Jonny.

Aaron nodded. "This is Apollo."

"Get that stupid collar off him," the leader said.

Jonny held his head high as Aaron unhooked the collar from around his neck.

The leader grabbed Jonny's upper arm, guiding him into the capitol. A painting of David Crockett smiled at them as they entered. The capitol pulsed with activity, from soldiers wearing the black of the Zinja Guard to men and women in suits to poor petitioners. No one seemed to pay much attention to Jonny and his escort. Everyone had their own worries to think about.

Jonny shook his head in despair. Zin didn't care about his people -- never had, never would. All Zin wanted was to rule the world and he didn't care how many people he had to run over in the process. Tyrant.

The leader of the guards pushed him into the elevator and they all went up to the top floor. Jonny was beginning to get nervous, wondering what Zin would do when he recognized him. Maybe Zin would even finish right then and there what he had tried to do ten years ago.

The elevator doors slid open and the leader guided Jonny down the plush hall and into a luxurious office. Bennett's own elegant office paled in comparison to Zin's. Everyone else, including Aaron and his men, waited outside the office. This time was apparently for Jonny and Zin alone.

"Dr. Zin?" The leader asked.

"Yes, who is it?" Zin's voice came from the chair behind a desk, though he was looking out a window and away from the door.

"It's Captain Mandrake, sir. Aaron brought Apollo."

The chair swung around and suddenly Jonny was staring at Dr. Zin, the man who had killed his father and destroyed his family and the world. Hatred and anger flared up in his eyes. In that instant, Jonny knew he could kill Zin if the opportunity ever arose. And then the feelings and emotions rushed out, leaving Jonny strangely hollow. That was the first time since before the fall that Jonny had harbored such strong passion. So many times it felt like his ability to truly live had been killed the same day Apollo had been created.

"So, you're the infamous Apollo." Zin's voice was harsher and deeper than Jonny last remembered. "Please, have a seat. There's so much for us to talk about."

Mandrake pressed Jonny down into a nearby chair and removed the gag.

"There's nothing for us to talk about." Jonny's voice grated through his dry throat.

Zin frowned, stood, and walked over to the dry bar that was built into the left side of the office. He poured some water into a glass and pulled another chair up close to Jonny's. Sitting, he placed the glass at his feet as he studied Jonny.

"You remind me of someone. But I can't quite remember who." Zin paused. "Did I know you before the fall?"

"Like I'm going to tell you anything, Zin." In truth, he was surprised that Zin had not known him from the first moment he had walked through the door. Of course, Zin was not exactly going to start looking for a person he thought ten years dead in Apollo's face.

"No, I would have remembered meeting someone with that scar."

Jonny tensed as Zin touched his face and the scar that ran from his right temple to down past his chin. The scar was Jonny's reminder of the day Zin had bombed the Quest compound.

"Do you suppose we could make some kind of deal, Apollo?"

"No."

Zin patiently sighed. "I haven't even mentioned what the agreement might be."

"The answer will always be no."

"Listen to my proposal anyway, Apollo." Zin leaned back in his chair. "I will give you freedom within Ninja borders in exchange for your real name. That's all I ask."

"No."

"Death or life, Apollo. It's your call." Reaching down, Zin took a long drink of water. "But know that before you die, we will still get your real name from you."

"You can try."

"I'll do more than that." Zin calmly interlaced his fingers. "Do you have any idea of how many people I have ordered to look for information on you? There are no known pictures and not a single file mentions your life before the fall. How have you been able to do it, Apollo? How have you been able to remain such a shadow?"

Jonny tacitly stared at Zin. This certainly wasn't the Zin he remembered from ten years before. But then again, time changes everything -- and everyone.

"I'm not that bad a man, not once you get to know me. I just happen to feel that I can help lead this world into a better time. We need a single leader again to help the former United States get back onto its feet. People have a tendency to call me names just because I want to help."

"You are a murderer, Zin."

Zin tilted his head to look at Jonny. "You did know me before the fall. So how come I can't remember you?" He shook his head. "That doesn't matter, I suppose. You have declined my proposal, have you not?"

"I have."

Zin looked up at Mandrake. "Take him to another room. Tonight we will

go and visit Dr. Messiah."

* * *

The moon was rising when Jessie, Hadji, Xander, Dion, and Ashley finally arrived on the outskirts of Austin.

"From here on out, we're using sign language to communicate," Jessie ordered. "We can't take any chances. If we get caught here, in the heart of Zinja, I don't know if we'll be able to escape."

"Where do you think he is?" Dion signed.

"The capitol," Hadji replied.

"How are we going to penetrate Zin's headquarters?" Ashley wondered.

"Hadj?" Jessie turned toward their coordinator. "You're usually the man with the plan. Please tell me you have some idea."

Hadji grinned. "In fact, I do. Could the average member of the Zinja Guard recognize Ashley yet?"

Ashley raised an eyebrow and shook her head. "No, I don't think so. I haven't been with Quinque long enough."

Hadji's smile widened. "Good."

* * *

"Excuse me, fellas." The two guards turned to see a beautiful young woman with brown hair approaching. "I was wondering if you could help me. I'm trying to find the old University of Texas campus."

"Well, you're not too lost," one of the guards replied. "It's to the west of here a mile or so. You won't be able to miss it."

"Great, thank you." She started to turn around but suddenly stopped, nervous. "There's nothing dangerous out on the streets tonight, is there? I've heard some rumors . . . "

"Of Dr. Messiah's rejects running through the darkened alleyways?" The guard laughed. "Those are nothing but rumors. But if it would make you feel safer, I'd be more than happy to escort you to the campus."

A hopeful look came over her face. "Do you think that would be all right? I mean . . . "

"It will be fine," the guard reassured. He turned toward his partner. "I'll be back in half an hour or so, Lee."

"I'll let anyone know where you are if they come looking for you," Lee replied, nodding.

The first guard moved next to the girl. "I'm Harry."

She smiled. "Laura. And thanks."

"Just part of the job." They started walking away from the capitol.
"Are you new in town?"

Laura nodded. "Yeah, I just moved here from Dallas about a week ago. I really haven't learned my way around yet."

"It takes a while," Harry admitted. "Did you ever come here before the fall?"

"Once. My parents and I used to have family here."

"Used to?"

"Yeah, they died not long after the fall."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

Laura shrugged. "In these days, you have to get used to death."

Suddenly something moved in the shadows from the alley to their right. Laura stifled a scream as Harry pushed her behind him.

"Stay here," he ordered, drawing his gun. "I'll be right back."

Moving cautiously, he was swallowed up by the blackness of the alley. Behind him, he never even heard Laura pick up a wrench until it slammed into the back of his head.

As Harry fell to the ground, Quinque was already moving into action.

"Good job, Ash," Jessie signed.

Ashley smiled. "Thanks. I was a Thespian in school. When there still were schools, that is."

Before long, Ashley was dressed in Harry's uniform. Xander handed Jessie and Ashley a small, black communications device. They both put the device in their right ear. The device would allow Quinque to hear what was going on inside the capitol as well as give them needed instructions without the Ninja Guard noticing. And it was so small that no one would see it unless they were specifically looking for it.

"Are you sure you want to do this, Jessie?" Xander asked as he held a piece of rope in a hand. "If you don't want to, now is your last chance to get out of it."

Jessie shook her head and stuck out her hands. "I'm the only one the guards will recognize immediately. Plus, I need you three out here to create a distraction once we've rescued Apollo." She paused. "How does he get into these situations?"

Xander grinned as he loosely tied Jessie's wrists together. "Is that too tight?"

Jessie tested the bonds. "It's nothing one of Hadji's students can't get out of." She turned toward Ashley. "All right, let's go."

Ashley took a deep breath and nodded. "Let's hope nothing goes too wrong." Grabbing Jessie's upper arm, they made their way to the capitol.

* * *

"Halt," the guard ordered as one of his guards approached with a prisoner. "What are you doing here?"

The guard, a female he did not recognize, pushed the prisoner forward. "This is Jessie Bannon, sir."

His eyes widened, identifying her from the pictures. "So it is. Good work, soldier." He sneered at the Quinque member. "I suppose you thought you'd be able to waltz right in here and rescue Apollo, didn't you? Well, this isn't some cartoon show."

Jessie spat on his shoes and the guard slapped her.

"You should remember your manners. Let's go take you to Dr. Zin. I'm sure he'll be very interested to hear that you're here." He pushed Jessie forward with the other guard following.

* * *

Jonny had been placed into a small room with a table and chair. The guards had tied him down into the chair and then left, waiting outside. He had no idea how much time had passed, though his stomach frequently reminded him that he had not eaten since breakfast, before the door opened again.

One of the guards who had escorted him to this fine, lovely room cut his bonds and grabbing his upper arm, hauled him to his feet. His hands, still handcuffed, had fallen asleep so long ago that Jonny wondered if he would ever regain feeling in them.

"Time to go visit Dr. Messiah," the guard said.

Quickly Jonny racked his mind for what he knew about Dr. Ben Messiah. Actually, Dulab did not know much about the elusive doctor. He was smart and deadly to anyone who got caught in one of his traps. Inventing anything from robotic machines to biological weapons, the doctor seemed to know a little about everything. And he hated Race Bannon, although no one in Dulab knew why. Finally, Jonny was going to get to meet Dr. Messiah. _ _

Though I sort of wish it wasn't under these circumstances.

The guard and his partner led him to the elevator, pushing the button for the basement. All too soon, the elevator's doors opened into a white hallway. They walked down the hall and through a set of large metal doors. Jonny's eyes grew wide at all the equipment in Dr. Messiah's laboratory.

"Welcome, Apollo." Dr. Zin came out from behind a piece of tall machinery. "What you see around you is only a small portion of Dr. Messiah's labs. However, I'm not sure if you'll met Dr. Messiah himself or not -- he's somewhat shy around strangers. But regardless,

you will get to meet one or two of his inventions." He turned around and started toward a metal chair in the middle of the room. "This is the starting point of Dr. Messiah's grandest work, as you will soon discover. Guards, strap him in."

The two guards unlocked his handcuffs and pushed Jonny into the chair. They pulled out some rope and tied his wrists to the cold, metal armrests.

Dr. Zin held up a circular device about the size of his fist. "This machine, my dear Apollo, will delve into your mind and pull out any memory we want. We will be able to find out your real name, your background, and even your connection with Race Bannon. And no matter how well you have been trained to resist, she will find a way in." He placed the device over Jonny's right ear. "Dr. Messiah? Are you ready?"

From somewhere to their left, a shadow shifted. "I am, Zin."

Jonny's eyes narrowed as he tried to see into the darkness. For some reason, the voice struck a chord of familiarity within his mind. He turned his thoughts back to his present situation -- trying to figure out who Dr. Messiah is would not get him out of this mess.

"Then go."

Jonny did not hear anything else but suddenly he was falling through a very familiar green swirling vortex. His eyes opened wide when he stopped moving and looked down at his digitized body. He was in . . . Questworld? But how?

* * *

Escorted by Ashley and the other guard, Jessie entered into Dr. Messiah's lab just in time to see a bright band of green run across Jonny's face, covering his eyes. Her mouth dropped as she realized what she was looking at.

"Oh my god," she whispered. "Questworld?"

Ashley shot her a confused look, but Jessie minutely shook her head, letting her know that she should not ask any questions.

"Dr. Zin." The guard hailed his leader. "There's someone here you might want to meet."

They saw Zin turn away from a computer screen where he had been monitoring Apollo. He said something to someone whose face they could not see and then came, frowning.

"What is it, soldier?"

"Sir, this is Jessie Bannon."

Zin's face broke out into a smile. "Well, of course it is. It is nice to see you again, Miss Bannon. I suppose you came to rescue Apollo. But as you can see, you're too late. By now Dr. Messiah has surely been able to retrieve the information we seek."

Jessie turned so that Ashley could see her hands.

"In just a moment when chaos breaks loose, I want you to figure out who built this," Jessie silently commanded her team member. "I'll get Apollo out of this."

"It looks like Questworld," Jessie said out loud to Zin. "But how? I thought the technology was lost when Dr. Quest was killed."

"And that, Miss Bannon, is where you are wrong. We have spent years researching Dr. Quest's works. My scientists have read every single paper he ever wrote. After his houses were destroyed, I sent people into the ruins to retrieve anything they could. And besides, Dr. Messiah is a genius." He grabbed her shoulder. "Come, let's go see what all we have discovered from our young friend, Apollo."

* * *

"IRIS, are you here?" Jonny's voice echoed through the empty plain. He knew he probably gave himself away with just that sentence, but he had to know. Was this really Questworld and how had Dr. Zin recreated it?

Suddenly the land started to shake and from the horizon a tall monster in silver armor approached.

"IRIS?" Jonny repeated.

"Identify yourself," the monster ordered. "Friend or foe?"

"Voice identification." Jonny swallowed. "Friend."

"Voice identification acknowledged."

"IRIS, memory scan." The disembodied voice was the same one Jonny almost recognized.

"No," Jonny argued. "Stop memory scan. IRIS, who is your creator?" Two could play at this game.

"Dr. Ben Messiah," IRIS replied.

"IRIS, who is Dr. Messiah?"

"Do not answer," the voice commanded. "Who are you, boy?"

"Apollo. And you're Dr. Messiah, I presume?"

"Presumption correct. How do you know about IRIS?"

And then he was sliding through the vortex again, logging out. When he opened his eyes, the lab was in chaos. Computers and machines all around him were on fire or smoking. The guards and scientists were so busy trying to save the equipment, that no one even glanced over at the chair to see whether he was still in Questworld or not. There was a slight tugging on his hand and Jonny turned to see Jessie beside him.

"Is it good to see you, Jess."

"You, too." She swiftly cut the ropes holding him down. "I think it's time we left Zin's hospitality."

"Agreed. I hope you have a plan," he replied as they ducked behind some of the equipment.

Jessie grinned at him. "Of course." She paused. "Sultan, now."

Red lights started going off, bathing the room in an eerie glow. Soldiers frantically ran back and forth, trying to determine the source of the sudden attack.

"Sandman," Jessie whispered. "Get out of here now. Apollo and I will find our own way out."

"Affirmative. See you outside, Caroline."

"Sultan, do you have good news for me?"

Jonny watched as Jessie listened to Hadji. None of the guards had noticed his absence yet, as distracted as they were, but it would not be long until someone looked over to the chair in the middle of the room.

"Thanks." She grabbed Jonny's hand. "Ready to get out of here?"

"More than ready."

They rushed out of the room, in the opposite direction of the door Jonny had entered through. Keeping to the shadows, they managed to escape the guards' eyes.

"I hope you know where you're going."

"Sultan hacked into their computers and pulled up the building blueprints."

Jonny raised an eyebrow. "Sultan is here?"

Jessie nodded. "Bannon didn't give him much of a choice."

They heard the yelling behind them suddenly increase in volume.

"I think they finally noticed I was gone." Jonny grinned.

Jessie held out a hand to stop him and fell to the ground. "Help me. We're looking for a hatch into the lower basement."

Jonny felt around in the darkness and after a few moments, found a handle. "I've got it, Jess." He twisted and the hatch creaked open.

Jessie turned on the flashlight in her watch and they peered through the tunnel. There was a ladder and Jonny immediately twisted himself onto it. Within seconds, they were both down and Jessie was closing the hatch door.

"All right, Sultan. We're down. Where now?" She was silent as they made their way to the ground. "Fine. We'll see you there."

They disappeared into the blackness.

* * *

An hour later, Jonny and Jessie met up with the rest of Quinque. Smiling and laughing, Jonny hugged each member of his team.

"Hadj, I've heard you're the person to thank for planning this rescue mission."

Hadji smiled at his brother. "It's good to see you, too, my friend." He turned toward Jessie. "Did you have any trouble getting out of the capitol?"

"We ran into a few soldiers, but nothing we couldn't handle," Jessie answered. "But we should start moving. Zin's not going to let Apollo leave Zinja that easily."

Hadji nodded. "I even see a car we might be able to take and make the journey to the plane that much shorter."

Quinque turned to look at their coordinator.

"Sultan, are you suggesting we steal a car?" Xander wondered.

Hadji grinned. "Most definitely."

* * *

Dr. Messiah stared at his screen, looking again at Apollo in Questworld. How had the boy known of IRIS? And how had he known how to use the machine? Sighing, he buried his head in his hands. The boy reminded him of his own son -- his dead son. Sometimes he would dream of what his son would have been like if he had survived. Since he had met Apollo a week before he often dreamed that his son would be like this strong willed fighter.

He shook his head. His son was dead. Bannon, one he once had called friend, had not saved him.

But Apollo had seemed to know how to maneuver in Questworld. How?

He closed his eyes, pulling up a memory of his son with his laughing eyes and his love of life. Unbidden, a picture of Apollo entered into the memory, placing itself over his dead son's face.

Dr. Messiah's eyes flashed open. _ _

Jonny?

End
file.